

Mobile Courts may get extra powers

Lacks safeguard against arbitrary use

THREE new clauses have been proposed to be added to the Mobile Court Act 2009 in a bid to empower executive magistrates. Under the existing act magistrates cannot mete out punishment to wrongdoers if they deny the offence. According to the amendments of this Act an executive magistrate leading a mobile court can punish or fine an offender based on the surrounding evidence and statements from witnesses even if the wrongdoer denies having committed the offence. The amended Act, if passed, could raise some misgivings amongst human rights activists and the general public.

The 2009 act was also aimed to curb food alteration, check sexual harassment and ensure that public exams are conducted properly. Such intentions are in the public's interest. But we have also noticed how mobile courts, in the recent past, have used the Act to arrest and hand out punishment to political opponents which does bring in the issue of human rights violation. Every offender has the right to a lawyer to defend himself or herself before a court. The Mobile Court (Amendments) Act 2015 will deprive the citizen from this basic right, giving scope for abuse of the act.

It is important to note that on October 18, 2011, the High Court, in response to a writ petition, questioned the legality of mobile courts and asked the government to explain within four weeks why the provisions of the law that empowers executive magistrates to exercise judicial powers through mobile courts, should not be declared unconstitutional. The newly amended Act, which will be vetted by the law ministry before it is passed, does not provide for safeguards against the law being applied in an arbitrary fashion. We hope after examination the law ministry will not approve of provisions that will allow for abuse of the law.

Freeing up roads and pavements

Minister makes frank admission

SPEAKERS at a recently organised seminar were informed by minister for roads and communications Obaidul Qader that the principal hindrance to freeing up roads and pavements from illegal squatters is political pressure. Whenever authorities go on eviction drives, influence from various quarters are brought to bear on the move to protect illegal and makeshift hawkers markets that have all but taken over pavements in the city and in many cases spilled on to roads themselves. Although they cater to marketing needs of the lower middle income groups, the government has never got around to solving the issue in a positive manner. Nevertheless, the malpractice must be dealt with. Otherwise, broadening roads by adding more lanes will have little effect in tackling the chaotic traffic jam the city experiences on a daily basis.

While pedestrians are forced to walk on roads since pavements are occupied, the situation is aggravated by errant behaviour of motor vehicles on roads. With little by way of observing and following traffic rules, especially vehicles belonging to various government bodies including the police, why would traffic rules be obeyed by others is a question to ponder. As it has now become customary for VIP traffic to move at will, often on the wrong side of the road, we observe that every driver given half the chance will break traffic rules to get a little ahead.

The primary concern for all is road safety which simply cannot be ensured if human beings and motor vehicles vie with each other to occupy the same space. And that scenario will not change until pavements and walkways are made available for pedestrians.

Openness brings more investment

In an exclusive interview with *The Daily Star*, His Excellency Swedish Ambassador Johan Frisell talks to Naznin Tithi about the challenges that Bangladesh faces in achieving its development goals.

The Daily Star: Sweden has been a long time friend and development partner of Bangladesh. What do you think are the major barriers to development here?

Johan Frisell: Bangladesh started from a very difficult position. The Swedish government has been supporting primary education, primary health, population control, rural development, etc. in Bangladesh. Many basic obstacles have been removed but there are still obstacles.

I think Bangladesh needs a proper tax system for generation of income for the government. Tax should be set at the minimum for the poorest, for the middle class it should be larger, and for the richest it should be quite substantial. The government needs to have its own budget. And it is also time to ensure equal distribution of wealth. So how we design development is really important.

The Swedish experience of development is, if you have no barriers to free trade, anyone can invest, anyone can import and export goods and services. You might think that for the short term this will be a problem because if you open up your market, there will be a lot of import from India and China and all over. How will your own industry survive? But in the medium to the long run, this will be beneficial because this openness will also attract investments, good ideas. The RMG sector has been so successful here because there was no restriction; anyone could come and import and export and set up factories. So go for free trade, go for open market.

Right now I think the single most important factor to get economic growth and to end poverty in Bangladesh is to get women into the workforce. Even now in Bangladesh, only a small segment of women are actually working outside their homes. If they have a formal job and income, it would mean that tens of millions of people who are now staying at home will enter the workforce. Currently, growth in Bangladesh stands at approximately 6 percent per year. If you put women into the workforce, I think you will automatically add another 2 percent to that. So gender equality, women's participation in the workforce is a key factor. You also need to ensure a transparent, tolerant and democratic society where you have fair elections and the government is accountable. If the government does something wrong, if it invests in the wrong direction and people realise that this has not been a good policy, in the next election people must have the opportunity to vote for another party. In most countries where we have seen good development, we have seen this shift. We have seen this shift in Bangladesh as well. You have to continue with that.

TDS: How would you evaluate the investment climate of Bangladesh? Could you talk about some Swedish investment plans here?

JF: Investment conditions in Bangladesh are basically good. We have several Swedish companies who have invested here -- some in production, some in service, and some have invested capital. One area where I think there is need for improvement is protection of investment. Here Bangladeshi legislation is not yet ade-



H.E. Johan Frisell

quately developed.

There are a couple of Swedish companies who have done very well here. The clothing company H&M is currently the single largest buyer of RMG from Bangladesh. IKEA is another company. These two companies have come, explored and decided to invest and stay here. I think there are many more Swedish companies who could do the same.

I am trying to visit Swedish companies in Sweden and elsewhere to make them see the opportunities of investing and trading with Bangladesh. We are changing slowly from a relationship that is more development oriented into a relationship that is more trade and investment based.

TDS: Tell us about your experiences of working with government bodies in Bangladesh.

JF: Working with government bodies takes place at different levels. At the top level, I have dialogues with ministers, state ministers and secretaries on important aspects of our development relations as well as our trade and investment relations. And I am received very well. They are very open, kind and welcome discussions and cooperation.

But sometimes bureaucracy is slow. It takes a long time to get a visa. I want the government to make sure that all those who are investing here face no problems with visas. I hear that a lot of businessmen get extension for one year only. After that, they have to leave and apply again, which is a long and tedious process. So I would like to see a change here.

We have Swedish companies who are fighting with the customs on different tariffs and so on. And there is

corruption. I don't see it for myself but I read a lot about it. So corruption is something that slows down the speed of service. It is hampering development. But there is room for improvement.

TDS: In your view, what are some of the projects that have been the most successful in Bangladesh?

JF: First, I would say rural development projects. We did a lot of rural development in the first 20 to 25 years -- local engineering, building roads and villages, etc. We are one of the core funders of the large government programmes on primary education. And we have seen very good results in enrollment of children in the first grade. The third would be general health. We have worked to extend basic health services even at the upazila and union levels. And within the health sector, we are also working in one particular sector, which is sexual and reproductive health. This covers everything starting from pre-natal care to natal care afterwards, vaccination, taking care of kids, etc.

One of our most important policies now is to support Bangladesh to create midwives. This is a specialised profession only devoted to sexual and reproductive health. Around three thousand young women will be educated in the nursing colleges around the country to become midwives. And in December 2015, the first batch of midwives will be ready. Then the government of Bangladesh will be able to send out qualified midwives throughout the country. We have midwife staff here in Bangladesh to help setup a curriculum for education. It will further reduce child mortality.

TDS: What are some of the areas that need more attention?

JF: Infrastructure, roads, railways, energy, urban planning, etc. are some areas that need attention. Dhaka now has 16 million inhabitants. The World Bank believes that in fifteen years, there will be 27 million people living in Dhaka. So you need forceful urban planning. If the population is going to be increased from 16 million to 27 million, most of them will land in slums. How you would approach that might be one of the biggest challenges for Bangladesh in the coming 10 to 15 years.

TDS: Any final words?

JF: Since I came here, I have been travelling a little bit and I see that some people feel they are left out of the big equation. This is a country with a government which is investing a lot in development. But there are small groups of people who do not entirely feel like a part of this mass movement. You have to make sure that there is a place for everyone -- be it minorities or ethnic groups or stranded Pakistanis. You also have to take care of the religious minorities -- Christians, Buddhists, Hindus. Right now I see that non-religious groups like secular bloggers are facing a very difficult time. Clearly, the majority of the population is the Bengali speaking Muslims. But there is so much variety and diversity in this society which, I think, is very important to retain. I would like to see Bangladesh as an open, pluralistic and tolerant society where there is a place for everyone.

Time to prepare for the next disaster

ANNETTE DIXON

ABOUT 9,000 lives have been lost to the devastating earthquake in Nepal on April 25 and the powerful aftershock on May 12. A conference in Kathmandu on June 25 will bring Nepal together with its international partners to build the country back better and safer.

Unfortunately, this is not just a Nepal challenge. From Afghanistan to Bangladesh, much of South Asia is located in one of the highest seismically active regions in the world. More than 600 million people live along the fault-line across the Himalayan belt that runs through Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bhutan.

The earthquake threat in South Asia is generated by the collision between three tectonic plates. The Indian plate is moving northward at a speed of about five centimeters a year. In doing so, it collides with the Eurasian Plate. Due to this collision, the Himalayan Mountains are forced upwards and a large number of earthquakes are generated. This has been happening for millions of years.

Over the past 100 years, the region has seen some major earthquakes -- 1934 Bihar-Nepal, 1945 Makran, 1950 Assam, 1993 Latur, 2001 Bhuj, 2005 Pakistan, 2015 Nepal. Just looking at the big magnitude earthquakes, however, can obscure the real picture. South Asia

is constantly beset by tremors. The World Bank recently analysed earthquake events over a one-year period, from May 2013 to May 2014, which impacted the South Asia region. Only considered were those earthquakes recorded by the United States Geological Survey's global earthquake monitoring database (USGS) greater than 4.0 magnitude on the Richter scale. The tally totaled 1,247 recorded earthquake events.

The next earthquake will happen. But what we do know is that there are many measures countries can take to protect their citizens against the next natural disaster. The next big earthquake need not become the South Asian mega-disaster of the 21st century.

Among the measures countries can take are building resilient housing, improving building codes, and strengthening critical infrastructure including

a disaster hits.

I specifically want to highlight the importance of strengthening schools. The Nepal earthquake rendered unusable (fully and partly damaged) more than 30,000 classrooms across 9,100 schools. The earthquake struck on a Saturday when schools were closed. Had it struck on a weekday, the lives lost and the devastation could have been far worse. Making schools safe for our children should become a priority across the region.

These things sound like they cost a lot of money. But not doing them can cost even more. This cost goes beyond the tragic loss of lives.

The World Bank estimates that every dollar invested in disaster prevention saves \$4 in disaster damage. A single large disaster can cost between three to six percent of a developing country's economic output. This can wipe out years of development progress that a country has worked hard to achieve. In Nepal, it was the poor that suffered the most from the earthquake.

Now is the time to invest in disaster resilience. This should be done across all sectors including transport, energy, agriculture, education, health, gender, housing and livelihoods.

South Asia should prepare for the next disaster now.

The author is Vice President for the South Asia Region of the World Bank.

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South Asia may have had earthquakes for millions of years. But the difference today is that more and more people are living in the earthquake zone, often crowded into rapidly growing cities. Much of this booming urbanisation in high risk seismic zones includes everything from mega-cities, to secondary and tertiary cities, to towns.

No one can predict when or where

schools, hospitals, bridges, dams, key road infrastructure, public buildings and so on. Strengthening disaster response mechanisms and providing better search and rescue equipment and training to first responders is critical. This also includes having contingency planning and systems set up to hand out food to the vulnerable and offer vaccinations to halt diseases that inevitably spread after

COMMENTS

"INCREDIBLE: Tigers clinch historic one-day series as teenage sensation Mustafiz steps in to maul Indians once again" (June 22, 2015)

Abul Fathah

I hope Bangladesh team will show their potential in the upcoming ODIs like the previous two matches. This series is nothing but revenge against India for what they did to us previously.

Rimon Arfin

Bangladesh has been an incredible team.

"Internet keeps Jamaat alive" (June 17, 2015)

Fawel Nur Uddin

They are too digital!

Tigers' historic victory

Congratulations to the Bangladesh cricket team for their emphatic win against India. By virtue of this win, Bangladesh has once again proven that, in cricket, they are now a force to be reckoned with. Defeating India is certainly pleasing; all thanks goes to the hard working Bangladeshi players who made this historic victory possible. It made the way for us to the 2017 ICC Champions Trophy for the first time. May Bangladesh continue to play like this.

Nasif ferdaus
Sylhet



PHOTO: STAR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Some tips on migration

Situations and conditions for migrants vary from country to country. It is important to know about the conditions of the country people want to migrate to and have a clear view, especially when it comes to opportunities available for permanent residence. Before migrating, immigrants should inquire about:

- Job opportunities
- Living conditions and cost of living
- Costs of education and/or technical training
- Accommodation system
- Immigration laws, rules and regulations, and official language of the country

Close relatives who live abroad, newspaper articles written by expatriates and the internet can be of great help and useful sources of information. Immigration rules and regulations are always changing so one has to be up to date with that.

An Anonymous Consultant
On e-mail

End waterlogging permanently

During the rainy season, the city dwellers of Chittagong have to suffer a lot because of waterlogging. Following heavy rainfall, water remains stagnant in the low-lying areas of the city. The newly elected mayor of Chittagong City Corporation has reiterated his commitment to solve the problem. Now we want to see some real actions in this regard. To end this problem, I suggest the following:

The canals and drains of the city area should be excavated. Illegal structures on the canals and drains should be removed. We hope the city corporation will take immediate actions to solve the problem of waterlogging as soon as possible.

Zabed Wali
Chittagong